

AIDS in Kenya: Understanding the Impact of HIV on Mothers and Children



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Kanina Holmes

[Gloria Gakii](#) has a difficult, delicate job. Working at the Pumwani Maternity Clinic in Nairobi, she has the task of telling many new mothers that they are infected with HIV, the deadly virus that causes AIDS.

"Some take it like a shock, they didn't expect [it]," said Gakii. They also have the fear of stigma. They don't know what will happen to their families. The others are scared of the blame." In almost all cases, HIV transmission has occurred through sexual contact.

Gakii's duties also involve documenting these responses as part of a Canada/Kenya project designed to learn more about the social and economic impact of HIV on local Kenyan women and their families. For example, she and her colleagues are expanding their knowledge of the links between HIV infection and income levels.

Vicious circle

"First of all, the individual, the mother who is HIV-infected, is not a very healthy person," explains [Jeckoniah Ndinya-Achola](#), the project leader. "They can no longer carry out their normal activities [especially] if they are self-employed, like the ones who survive by selling vegetables and other items. They are no longer able to expand their activities in order to increase their level of income." The result, he says, is that these women "are essentially in a vicious circle, [whose] final sufferers are the children."

This project represents the third and final phase of a fruitful collaboration between the University of Nairobi and the [University of Manitoba](#), which began in 1986. With funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Kenya's National Health Research and Development Program (NHRDP), the research team is following the lives of 650 women, about three-quarters of whom are HIV positive.

Previously, the team examined the rate of HIV transmission from mother to child — which it estimated at about 45% — and studied the clinical and epidemiological aspects of HIV and AIDS. Most of the laboratory work was carried out by the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg while the field work was conducted through the Department of Microbiology at the University of Nairobi.

Phase three results

Since the launch of phase three in July 1996, the project team has found that more than half of the HIV-positive women it surveyed did not inform anyone of their infectious status. Some of the women who did tell their partners reported being beaten as a result. Overall, these women were more likely to be widowed or separated from their partners than women who have not been infected with the AIDS virus.

One of the most pressing issues today is the growing number of AIDS orphans. Experts estimate that 1.2-1.5 million adults and more than 400,000 children in Kenya are infected with HIV. So far, out of all the project participants, 39 HIV-positive mothers — along with 25 of their partners — have died, leaving behind 94 children. Extended families traditionally have looked after these orphans. But researchers are now seeing cases where children are rejected or abandoned by their relatives, by schools, or by orphan's homes, whose capacity to take them in is being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem.

HIV-infected orphans

"There is great reluctance to take on HIV-infected children, partly because of fears that somebody else in the household will get the virus, partly because of the stigma associated with it, partly because of the financial obligation, and partly because of the emotional cost," adds [Frank Plummer](#), director of research for the Kenyan project. To encourage acceptance of these children, his team is recommending the establishment of education programs for their relatives, as well as the adoption of a national education policy that would prohibit discrimination on the basis of HIV status.

Dr Plummer and his colleagues have found that even children who are not infected with HIV suffer, when they live in households where one or both parents have the AIDS virus. One reason is that sick parents have less time and money to look after their children. Vaccinations, among other basic health measures, are often neglected.

The researchers are now conducting case studies — involving in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and home visits — of 100 women to obtain further information about the risk factors and frequency of mother-to-child HIV transmission, and the impact of HIV infections on childhood morbidity and mortality. When the project ends next year, the team will present its results and conclusions to key Kenyan government ministries.

Kanina Holmes is a Canadian journalist and the 1996 winner of IDRC's Internship Award at the London-based Gemini News Service.

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